

Beyond the boundaries of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Heather Johnson and Mike Edwards



Before restoration: A section of the Kenai River with cement blocks added to try to reduce bank erosion. The cement blocks are not fish-friendly. Photo Credit: Heather Johnson/USFWS

When we think about the work of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we usually think about federal employees working on federal lands, such as the Kenai or Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuges. We don't think about these employees assisting private citizens with projects on private land. Yet, across the nation, each year, thousands of upland and wetland acres and hundreds of river miles are restored on private lands to enhance fish and wildlife habitat. This is all happening through a program called Partners for Fish and Wildlife. The program celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2007.

The Partners Program began in the northern Midwest with an outcry to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to reduce the loss of wetland and native prairie in the Prairie Pothole Region of the United States. There was a great deal of "sod busting" going on to plow up native prairie and drain wetlands to plant crops that could turn a profit. The Service, the state agencies, conservation groups, duck hunters, and local citizens

were observing that after the "sod busting" occurred, the loss of thousands of ducks, geese, shorebirds, and cranes soon followed. They began looking for a way to slow down the agricultural development and look for positive solutions.

In the same Midwestern states, there are many National Wildlife Refuge units administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Refuge employees began to think creatively about how they could play a role. A small group of visionary conservationists sat down and said, "We can't do conservation work only on federal and state land. We have to work with private and tribal landowners as well. If we want to have native prairie and wetlands, we have to find a way to work with landowners to not only provide habitat for wildlife, but find a way to help landowners stay profitable on their land." This small group of visionaries helped to start the first private land habitat restoration projects in the Midwest that later led to one of the most successful national U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service programs—the Partners Program.

Over twenty years ago, key partners went and lobbied Congress for the first Partners Program funding. It wasn't much money, but it was a start. They developed some guiding principles, which led to a program policy that still exists to this day. The guiding principles and program policy are based on trust, respect, honesty, flexibility, and open communication. The founders of the Partners Program thought long and hard about how to make a private land habitat restoration program work. They learned that it has to be simple and practical, with few hoops to jump through. And, 20 years later, their vision is a huge reality that has translated into thousands of private landowner agreements across the nation.

The Partners Program was established in Alaska in 1995 with a modest amount of funding that supported eight stream bank restoration projects on the Kenai River and one fish passage project near Yakutat. The Alaska program has grown steadily since 1995. Initially the program was administered from the Regional Office in Anchorage; funding increases have al-

lowed the Program to grow and there are now Partners Program biologists stationed in US Fish and Wildlife Field Offices in Fairbanks, Anchorage, Juneau, and Soldotna.



After restoration: The same section of the Kenai River after removing the cement blocks and stabilizing the bank with a technique using brush layering and cabled spruce trees. The willow cuttings in the brush layering will take root and provide riparian vegetation while the spruce trees will slow bank erosion and provide habitat for small fish, such as salmon fry. Photo Credit: Heather Johnson/USFWS

Locally, the focus of the Partners Program has been on interjurisdictional fish (i.e., salmon), with an emphasis in three key areas; stream bank restoration,

riparian zone protection, and fish passage improvement. In working in these key areas we teamed up with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to create a very successful restoration partnership known locally as the Cost-Share Program. In the 13 years of the Cost-Share Program, over 430 projects have been completed that resulted in over 13,700 feet of stream bank re-vegetation/rehabilitation, over 38,600 feet of stream bank protection (elevated, light penetrating grate walks and cabled spruce tree revetments) and 3,300 feet of structures that are detrimental to juvenile salmon removed from streams, primarily on the Kenai River. Although the majority of our Partners projects have involved salmon habitat, the program also supports projects that benefit other species such as migratory birds or resident fish species of conservation concern.

To learn more about the Partners Program on the Kenai Peninsula, as well as other Service companion programs, such as the Coastal Program, Fish Habitat Action Plan, and Fish Passage program, please contact Mike Edwards at the Kenai U.S. Fish & Wildlife Field Office, 43655 Kalifornsky Beach Road, Soldotna, Alaska 99669; 907-260-0125 or mike_edwards@fws.gov

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